

# The Glory of BYZANTIUM

A Student Guide

OBJECTS AND TECHNIQUE



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Welcome to "*The Glory of Byzantium*" at  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This special exhibition, which features almost three hundred and fifty objects, explores works of art that were created between the mid-ninth and the mid-thirteenth centuries; that's between six hundred and a thousand years ago.

The borders of the Byzantine Empire shifted throughout its history; during its early period, the Byzantine emperor controlled most of the land surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. During the Middle Byzantine era, its territory was essentially in the eastern Mediterranean.

You'll see many beautiful objects in the exhibition, from jewelry and manuscript pages, to textiles and sculpture. This guide will take you to just four of them and will concentrate on how they were made.

Many of the objects are quite small, so look carefully, and take your time.

First, find the *Icon of the Annunciation* in Gallery 4.

#### *Icon of the Annunciation*

Sinai or Constantinople late 12th century

Tempera on wood

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt

## ICONS

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The word icon comes from the Greek *eikon*, meaning image. The Byzantine icon usually was an image of a saint or divine figure. Materials ranging from ivory to enamel to marble could also be used in the making of icons. However, the most commonly used material was wood, such as cedar, pine, or walnut.

An icon could be of any material or shape — rectangular, square, round, or oval — depending on its use and location in the church or the home.

## The Annunciation

This particular icon shows Mary sitting on a throne, dressed in the purple garb of royalty, weaving. She is being visited by the angel Gabriel, whose robes seem to float and sway. He has come to tell her of her son, Christ's, approaching birth.

The scene shows wonderful, intricate details, from the roof garden, to the sea creatures who swim in the water. The dove represents the holy spirit — the spirit of God.

## TECHNIQUE

Wooden Byzantine icons most commonly were painted with tempera over a wooden panel. First, the wood was prepared. The smoothed surface was covered with a layer of fish glue and thin layers of plaster. Then the surface was smoothed down.

Next, the outline of the scene or figure was transferred to the plaster surface. This was done using an *anthivolon*, a pricked cartoon. This was a sheet of paper onto which an outline had been punched with small holes. The *anthivolon* was then placed over the wood. Charcoal dust was applied over it with a sponge or cloth. The dust sifted through the holes, leaving an outline on the plaster. The pattern was then incised into the surface with a sharp tool.

Prior to creating the scene or figure, the ground (the surface that would not be decorated) was covered with gold leaf. The painter then applied color inside the outline, starting with the darkest colors (the underpainting), and moving through lighter colors until he was using white highlights for certain areas of flesh and clothing. Egg tempera — yolks mixed with natural pigments — were used to make the colors.

The last step was to cover the surface with layers of varnish to protect the icon and the colors.

# CLOISONNÉ

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Next, find the Icon of St. Demetrios in Gallery 5. It's to your right as you walk in, lying flat in a case with many other objects, so look carefully.

## *Icon with Saint Demetrios*

**Byzantine (Constantinople), first half of the 11th century**

**Gold and cloisonné enamel**

**Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum,**

**Kulturbesitz**

**Berlin, Germany**

With his hands raised in prayer, this image of Saint Demetrios is immediately commanding and dramatic. What else makes it so striking? Notice the rich colors and patterns, including the upside-down hearts; they were probably a popular pattern of the day, although their exact meaning is unknown. The earliest examples of this pattern can be seen in seventh-century mosaics in a church in Greece.

Known for being a warrior saint, Demetrios is often shown in a uniform or military dress; here he is wearing a *chlamys*, a cloak worn at the Byzantine court.

## TECHNIQUE

This icon is made of gold and cloisonné enamel. Cloisonné was made by soldering small metal strips (*cloisons*) to a metal background; these strips formed small compartments. The strips were often made of gold, and were attached edge up.

An enamel paste, which would later be fired, was placed in the compartments; colored glass or semiprecious stones such as garnets were also often used.

Cloisonné was used for many decorative objects, including jewelry.

# Mosaics

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In Gallery 6, find *Mosaic of Deacon Stephen from the Cathedral of the Mykhailivs'kyi Zolotoverkhyi Sobor (Saint Michael's of the Golden Domes)*

## *The Deacon Stephen*

Kievan Rus' (Kiev) ca. 1108-13

Mosaic (gold and glass tesserae)

National Architectural Conservation Area "Saint Sophia of Kiev,"

Kiev, Ukraine

Known as the first martyr (someone who sacrifices his life for a cause he believes in), Saint Stephen holds an object in each hand.

One hand grasps a *censer*, a vessel for burning incense, while the other holds a *pyxis*, a box used for holding incense or bread for Communion.

Mosaics were first found in the Middle East and date back to 3000 B.C. Greek mosaics made of pebbles were used as decoration for floors in houses of wealthy people as well as in public buildings. The Romans added to the technique by using many colors and working with *tesserae*, small cubes of colored marble, tile, and glass paste.

During the Byzantine era, several changes occurred: mosaics were used to decorate wall surfaces, and the extensive use of gold tesserae was introduced. Mosaics were now used as the official means of expressing Christian themes and the state through a decorative medium.

## TECHNIQUE

First, several layers of plaster were spread over the surface by means of trowels or spatulas. The plaster was made of lime mixed with such materials as sand, crushed tiles, or volcanic ash. The roughest layer was applied to the wall or floor. The next layer was less coarse; the third layer finer still. On this third layer the artist outlined the image he had chosen. While the plaster was still damp, tesserae made of such materials as pebbles, semiprecious stones, marble, and pottery were placed over the outline with tools called pincers, slim spatulas, or prickers. When the work dried, it was cleaned with straw brushes and water.

## GOLD TESSERAE

Making gold tesserae was a complicated process. One means of preparation involved making a kind of glass and gold "sandwich": glue was applied onto a thin layer of glass; on top of that a sheet of gold foil was placed. A fine layer of glass was then laid on top of the foil. Another method involved mixing gold with glass in a liquid form. It was fixed into the proper position after the mixture had cooled.

# TEXTILES

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Finally, in Gallery 8, find the *Textile with Roundels of Elephants, Senmurvs, and Winged Horses*

## *Textile with Roundels of Elephants, Senmurvs, and Winged Horses*

Eastern Mediterranean, 11th or 12th century

Silk; weft-faced compound twill (samite)

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution,  
New York, N.Y.

Given by John Pierpont Morgan, from the Miguel y Badia Collection

Only six fragments remain of this beautiful textile, of which this is the largest.

The fabric may have been part of a *chasuble*, a garment worn by a priest at Mass. It's notable for its wonderful designs and for the influences of cultures around the world: the elephants probably come from Asia, while the winged horses and *senmurvs*, a combination of a bird and a four-legged creature, might have been inspired by Sassanian tradition in Iran. These creatures may have been symbols of divine protection or royalty.

Since similar imagery was used throughout the Mediterranean and Near East during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it's hard to pinpoint exactly where this is from.

Considered one of the most luxurious goods in Byzantium, silk was used for trade. Colored silks were worn by people according to their rank.

## TECHNIQUE

Raising silkworms is a complicated and time-consuming process.

Silkworms are so delicate that even a strong smell may kill them. Silk weaving developed primarily in areas where the mulberry tree grew, since silkworms feed on the leaves.

A story — perhaps true, perhaps not — claims that Byzantine monks smuggled silkworm eggs out of China in staffs made of bamboo cane.

When it reaches maturity, the worm spins a silk cocoon from a single thread. Care has to be taken so that the worm does not bite its way out of the cocoon. The silk is then unwound in an extremely delicate process. Finally, the silk is woven into fabric.

Weaving was (and is) an extraordinarily complicated process. Silk weaving is done on a loom. All woven fabrics consist of two elements: the **warp**, sturdy, tightly twisted threads laid parallel and running the length of the cloth, and the **weft**, softer, thicker threads that intersect with the warp.

In this particular textile, the warp was left undyed, while the weft consisted of red, dark blue, and light blue silk threads.

You have finished this student guide. The following list of resources will give you more information about Byzantine culture and the function of some of the works of art.

## RESOURCES

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- Avi-Yonah, Michael. **The Art of Mosaics**. Lerner Publications: Minneapolis, 1974.
- Defrasne, Jean. **Stories of the Byzantines**. Burke Books: New York, 1983.
- Harpur, James. **Revelations: The Medieval World**. Henry Holt and Company: New York, 1995.

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